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Centre–Province Relations in Personalist Autocracies: Explaining the Emergence and Survival of Powerful Provincial Leaders

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Abstract

We have limited knowledge of how the insecure environment characteristic of personalist dictatorships affects the behaviour of provincial leaders. In this article, we argue that such provincial leaders face a trade-off: either they can keep a low profile but remain vulnerable to the capriciousness of the ruler (the acquiescent strategy), or they can gamble and try to build a power base of their own as a defence against the whims of the dictator (the power-accruing strategy). Next, we specify three contextual conditions, each of which makes provincial leaders more likely to choose and succeed with a power-accruing strategy, which in turn allows them to rule their province with an iron fist. Finally, empirically, we illustrate our arguments through a number of example cases and an in-depth study of a contemporary, very powerful provincial leader in a personalist authoritarian regime: Ramzan Kadyrov, leader of the Chechen Republic within Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Keywords: personalist autocracies; comparative authoritarianism; centre–periphery relationship; Russia

Every dictator, no matter how powerful, must delegate authority to a great number of people within his regime in order to uphold control over the country's territory and the state apparatus.[1] Among this pool of subordinates, the political leaders of large subnational administrative units, which we refer to as 'provincial leaders', represent an important group. They are responsible for overseeing the local implementation of policies, for raising revenues to the regime, punishing dissent and, more generally, for maintaining provincial stability. The reach and strength of the dictator's rule is thus conditional on the degree to which provincial leaders are subordinate to central authorities and effectively carry out their orders (Migdal 1988: 2015–2017).

On the one hand, the autocrat benefits from capable provincial leaders as they help secure his rule of every corner of the country. On the other hand, he has reason to fear exactly such aides, because they will be particularly adept at accruing independent power. Hence, the dictator finds himself in a serious dilemma,

known as 'the loyalty–competence trade-off'. Should he opt for weak incompetent sycophants or shrewd, competent representatives, who, with time, have strong incentives to challenge him either directly, by supporting a palace coup against him, or indirectly, by ignoring his directives and thus undermining his ability to govern (Egorov and Sonin 2011; Geddes et al. 2018: 79–85; Tullock 1987: 122–123; Wintrobe 2000: 335–337; Zakharov 2016)?

The loyalty–competence trade-off is particularly challenging in personalist autocracies (Egorov and Sonin 2011), where power is vested in a narrow circle consisting of the dictator and his closest associates. The diffusion of control, which is at the heart of delegation, is simply incompatible with the very logic of authority in these regimes (Geddes 1999). As evidence of this, research shows that personalist dictators are particularly averse to independent, competent and powerful provincial leaders and prefer loyal subordinates instead (Egorov and Sonin 2011; Zakharov 2016). We also know that they more frequently pursue the practice of 'shuffling' – that is, rotating officials from one position to another – to avoid the rise of alternative centres of power (Svolik 2012: 79; Tullock 1987: 28; Woldense 2018).

Nonetheless, the presence of independent and powerful provincial leaders within personalist autocracies does seem to be a regularly occurring phenomenon, as illustrated in case studies on, for example, Mobutu's Zaire (Reno 1997), the Philippines under Marcos (Overholt 1986) or present-day Central Asian personalist regimes (Jones 2004). So how, then, can we explain the emergence and survival of powerful provincial leaders in personalist autocracies?

To answer this question we first theorize how the incentive structure characteristic of personalist regimes affects the behaviour of the provincial leaders. We argue that the provincial leader too faces a trade-off between two strategies, each of which produces different outcomes in terms of personal power maximization and security. Where the provincial leader follows an 'acquiescent strategy', he plays it safe, keeps a low profile and makes sure that the dictator is satisfied with his performance. However, to avoid 'sticking out', he must also give up on the opportunity to use his position to maximize personal power and wealth, which in turn makes him vulnerable and easy prey for demotion and reshuffling in the longer run. If he instead follows 'the power-accruing strategy', the provincial leader makes the most of his position by bolstering his power locally and boosting his political weight nationally. This strategy not only satisfies his own lust for power and wealth but it also makes it more costly to get rid of him should the dictator decide to pursue such an option. However, with this strategy, the provincial leader risks catching the eye of the dictator, who will be watchful to dispose of, or even eliminate, people who are rising above the average in power and influence (Tullock 1987: 29). While the benefits in terms of power, wealth and personal security are all greater for the power-accruing strategy in the longer run, the short-term risks are substantially larger.

Next, we propose three conducive conditions, each of which provides for a more permissive context and/or strengthens the incentive for the provincial leader to accumulate independent power. We emphasize that particular province characteristics (resource-rich provinces or troublesome provinces marred by political instability), particular province tasks (high-intensity repression tasks) and particular periods of time during personalist rule (periods where succession issues at the national level become salient) all make the power-accruing strategy a more likely

and viable outcome. Either these conditions make power maximization especially attractive to the provincial leader, or they make it less likely that the personalist ruler will immediately punish such behaviour.

Finally, to test these arguments, we conduct an in-depth case study of a contemporary, very powerful provincial leader in a personalist authoritarian regime: Ramzan Kadyrov, leader of the Chechen Republic, which is a federal subject within Russia. The case study is based on both available and new empirical data (in the form of interviews), and it offers an almost ideal-type illustration of the workings of each of the three conditions identified as important explanatory factors behind the emergence and survival of powerful provincial leaders within personalist autocracies. In addition, we add further credence to our arguments through a discussion of six additional illustrative cases from within the wider post-Soviet region.

The article thus offers both innovative theoretical arguments and novel, in-depth empirical knowledge of a topic that has gone largely unnoticed in the literature on comparative authoritarianism. The analysis of the provincial leader's trade-off is central for our understanding of how personalist dictatorships work. It not only provides insights on the peculiar centre–province relations that characterize these regimes. It also illuminates how local contexts and decisions by provincial leaders shape the repressive strategy of the personalist ruler as well as the degree to which he can exercise control over his country, both of which have ramifications for important outcomes such as regime stability and economic growth. Lastly, the focus on power-accruing provincial leaders can help us better understand how some of the most backward, repressive and conflict-ridden subnational regions of the world – such as the Chechen Republic – operate.

Subnational politics in personalist autocracies

All dictators delegate power to subordinates such as provincial leaders. However, *to whom* they delegate power and *how* varies across institutional contexts. Personalist dictatorships stand out in both regards. The hallmark of personalist regimes is centralized authority and a high degree of personal control in the hands of the ruler. To protect his power, the personalist ruler is particularly attentive to keeping subordinates on their toes and counter the emergence of rivals (Geddes 1999: 130). Personalist autocrats also rarely dedicate much attention to improving public goods provision. Research shows that personalist regimes in comparison to other authoritarian subtypes have lower economic growth and lower domestic investment rates, and they are more corrupt (Chang and Golden 2010; Wright 2008). Both characteristics have important implications for the types of subordinates personalist dictators promote and how they control them.

First, due to their low preference for public goods provision and strong preference for absolute control, personalist dictators are rarely looking for provincial leaders that master the art of effectively stimulating growth and investments or skilfully administering efficient provision of welfare goods and services. Instead, the tasks they primarily expect a provincial leader to carry out include punishment of dissent, manipulation of information flows and elections, and management of local elite scuffles (Zakharov 2016: 475). In short, provincial leaders should make sure that their provinces do not cause any trouble for the regime.

This resonates well with existing research, as personalist autocrats do indeed seem to prefer loyalty to competence, especially so when regime stability is threatened (Egorov and Sonin 2011; Zakharov 2016). Case studies on, for example, Hun Sen's Cambodia (Morgenbesser 2018), Saddam Hussein's Iraq (Blaydes 2018) and Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire (Reno 1997) also illustrate this logic. Likewise, work on Vladimir Putin's Russia demonstrates that the economic performance of local political subordinates such as governors and mayors is indeed unrelated to the trajectory of their political careers. What matters, instead, is that they deliver the vote in national elections and thereby show loyalty to the regime (Reuter 2013; Reuter and Robertson 2012). In contrast, a growing subliterature on the Chinese Communist Party regime shows more mixed results, which indicates that important differences in centre–province relations exist between personalist authoritarian regimes and party-based autocracies.[2]

Secondly, as the emergence of powerful rival factions constitute the greatest threat to the survival of a personalist dictator (Geddes 1999: 130; Geddes et al. 2018), the ruler will be particularly attentive to both disloyal provincial leaders and to those who appear loyal but seem to be rising above the average in power and influence (Tullock 1987: 29). For the personalist dictator, the problem is that he often has to rely on imperfect signals when trying to determine who is loyal and who is growing in influence. He cannot be sure that those that profess loyalty really are loyal or that those who perform their duties well do not simultaneously build independent power, which in turn would allow them to challenge him in the future. This means that for personalist autocrats, the greatest problem is not choosing between competent or loyal subordinates. Rather, what keeps these dictators awake at night is whether they should keep shrewd, apparent loyalists who run their provinces effectively but perhaps are accruing independent power, or replace them with less powerful and less astute sycophants that might not get the job done as effectively.

Given this uncertainty and the strong preference for absolute control, most personalist dictators opt for a control strategy in line with the saying 'better safe than sorry'. Through the practice of 'shuffling', they frequently demote officials or rotate them from one position to another (Geddes et al. 2018; Jackson and Rosberg 1982; Svolik 2012: 79–81; Tullock 1987: 28; Woldense 2018).[3] Recently, in 2018, Egypt's increasingly personalist president, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, at the stroke of a pen removed as many as 21 of the 27 regional governors (*Egypt Today* 2018).

Through shuffling, the personalist ruler effectively disrupts local power accumulation before provincial leaders become too strong and independent to control. In addition, he sends important signals to other subordinates (cf. Sudduth 2017: 1772) by giving the harshest punishments to those representatives that appear most autonomous – be it through complete exclusion from the regime or criminal charges and jail.

The provincial leader's trade-off

So far we have argued that personalist dictators have a strong preference for loyal subordinates, pursue more shuffling to control subordinates, and are particularly alert to punish those who demonstrate high levels of aptitude and ambition. It

seems reasonable to assume that provincial leaders in personalist settings understand this well. So, how do these constraints shape their behaviour? Do different contextual conditions prompt them to follow different strategies? These questions have only received little attention in the literature on comparative authoritarianism.

Therefore, we now flip the perspective from that of the dictator to that of his subordinate – the provincial leader. We assume that provincial leaders, just like national players (Wintrobe 2000: 108), are primarily interested in accumulating power and wealth. In personalist autocracies, where neopatrimonial practices and corruption thrive, provincial leaders have good opportunities for this. The control over a province allows the provincial leader to extract resources through corruption schemes, construct beneficial conditions for his own investments and he can secure exclusive privileges for himself, his relatives, friends and supporters. Sometimes, provincial leaders can even use their position to get access to, and exert influence on, the national political arena (Gelman 2010; Gibson 2005).

However, given the high risk of becoming the victim of a reshuffle or, even worse, demotions or purges, provincial leaders in personalist regimes must always weigh their lust for power against the security risk they face. In balancing these two concerns, provincial leaders face a trade-off. We term this the 'provincial leader's trade-off'. In what follows, we illustrate this balancing act by presenting two ideal-typical strategies between which the provincial leader must choose. The preferred strategy may differ over time, but it is not possible to follow both strategies at the same time.

The first strategy is a reactive one, which we term the 'acquiescent strategy'. Due to the ever-looming risk of shuffling or arbitrary punishment, the provincial leader has a strong incentive to do his utmost to keep the dictator happy, or at least not cause him to worry. This means that the provincial leader should constantly profess loyalty to the incumbent, both publicly and in more closed circles, and satisfactorily fulfil the tasks put before him, which are necessary for maintaining and consolidating the regime (Zakharov 2016). In addition, given that the dictator is likely to apply the tactic of 'cutting off the head of the tallest flower' (Tullock 1987: 29), the provincial leader should temper his lust for power and wealth to avoid giving the dictator any reason to worry. With the acquiescent strategy, the provincial leader tries to stay under the radar in the hope that he can keep his position or, as a reward for his devotion, be promoted to an even more lucrative and influential one. However, this strategy not only means that the provincial leader must forgo many of the opportunities for increasing his power, it also leaves the provincial leader defenceless if the personalist autocrat does suddenly decide to target him. Numerous case studies have shown how personalist rulers also shuffle acquiescent provincial leaders and even sometimes punish them severely (Blaydes 2018; Matsuzato 2004; Morgenbesser 2018; Samphantharak and Malesky 2008; Woldense 2018).

Given the arbitrariness of shuffling, somewhat counterintuitively, the provincial leader has incentives to do exactly what the dictator fears the most: build a power base of his own to raise the costs associated with removing him. This second strategy, the 'power-accruing strategy', is therefore a more proactive one. Entrenched and powerful provincial leaders with strong connections with members of the dictator's inner circle are not easy to overcome, and removing them involves considerable risks and costs for the dictator (Siegel 2018: 257). Hence, a power-accruing

strategy that serves as reshuffle proofing is far from an irrational protection against the whims of a personalist dictator.

With inspiration from Edward Gibson (2005), we argue that provincial leaders gain such reshuffle-proofing power through strategies aimed at securing 'boundary control'.[4] Such control is won through monopolization of local power, combined with activities aimed at fending off interference from the centre. In the authoritarian context we are studying here, monopolizing local power means controlling provincial institutions and resources, dividing and oppressing the opposition and, if possible, winning the support of (at least a substantial part of) the local population (Gibson 2005: 109–110). To fend off interference from the capital, the provincial leader needs political weight and independence, which is best achieved by actively taking part in politics at the national stage and by seeking to shape political and socioeconomic linkages in a way that decreases asymmetrical dependence on the centre (Gibson 2005: 110–112).

Thus, the power-accruing strategy allows the provincial leader to exploit his position and maximize power and wealth and makes it more difficult for the personalist dictator to remove him. However, as personalist rulers are likely to target provincial leaders exactly when they are growing in influence and power, accruing power and securing boundary control is obviously a high-risk strategy. Given the major risks associated with the first attempts to accrue power, we should expect this strategy to be attempted and implemented successfully only under certain conditions.

How context shapes strategies

We argue that provincial leaders will choose their strategy based on a calculation of expected gains from maximizing power and wealth against the expected risks of sanctions from the ruler. Thus, provincial leaders will be more likely to follow a power-accruing strategy when conditions make for particular high gains and/or make the ruler more willing to accept, or less capable of punishing, such behaviour. In the following, we point to three such contextual factors connected to particular province characteristics, province tasks and periods in time during personalist rule.

First, subnational provinces differ in terms of political stability and local resource availability. As for the former characteristic, we expect leaders of troublesome provinces – such as opposition strongholds, (pro-secessionist) ethnic enclaves and provinces marred by armed conflicts or a recent history of such – to experience more leeway than leaders of more stable provinces. Troublesome provinces pose a greater threat to the general stability of the regime, and the personalist dictator is therefore likely to accept that effective local governance comes at a higher price. Only a provincial leader with power-capabilities above the average can root up an opposition or weed out a secessionist stronghold. Thus, in such cases, the personalist ruler is likely to perceive local power accrual as a necessary means to secure stability, and he will therefore be inclined to grant his appointed representative more power and leeway. Even when control of the province is re-established, the autocrat can be reluctant to remove the successful provincial leader out of fear that doing so will open a window of opportunity for opponents of the regime to regain a foothold. For these

reasons, we expect leaders of troublesome provinces to be more likely to attempt, and succeed with, a power-accruing strategy.

Provinces also differ in terms of prosperity and possibilities for extraction of local resources (Sheng 2009). Leaders of resource-rich provinces can more easily channel substantial rents into their own pockets, and thus more easily use this to build an independent local power base (Gibson 2005: 110–112). In contrast, in resource-poor provinces, provincial leaders will have to rely on subsidies from the national government. Richness in resources thus makes power-accruement both more lucrative and more feasible. Note, however, that although the proactive strategy is more tempting when resources are abundant, we should not expect the personalist dictator to accept power accruement under such conditions alone. Unlike with troublesome provinces, the autocrat will punish power-accruing provincial leaders if he detects such behaviour and is strong enough to act.

Secondly, just as provinces differ, so do the tasks put before the provincial leaders. Some tasks demand that provincial leaders perform actions that are particularly conducive to power-accruement in the short run but also lock in a preference for this strategy in the longer run. Examples include clamping down hard on local rival factions within the regime, violently repressing opposition groups, killing rebels, and outmanoeuvring powerful oligarchs and criminal gangs. When provincial leaders embrace such tasks, they often receive extraordinary resources and more leeway from the centre. Such task-solving is thus a window of opportunity for the provincial leader. It makes power-accruement easier and less dangerous to pursue.

However, when the job is done, we would no longer expect the personalist dictator to allow the leader of such a province to continue accruing power. Nonetheless, the provincial leader might still have a strong incentive to stick to this strategy if there is a risk that those groups targeted with repression will seek revenge (Zakharov 2016: 457). The fear of retribution from the affected party can 'lock in' preferences for the power-accruing strategy in the longer run as only consolidation of the provincial leader's position can keep local avengers at bay. Thus, we expect repression tasks to allow provincial leaders to accrue power in the short run and weaken the incentive to shift to an acquiescent strategy in the longer run – even though this is likely to attract unwanted attention from the dictator.

Thirdly, certain periods in time during personalist rule are particularly auspicious for power-accruement. As Alexei Zakharov (2016) argues, those who are most loyal to the dictator and enjoy his trust the most are also those who face the greatest challenges in keeping their position in the event the ruler is overthrown. Thus, in personalist regimes where the autocrat is seriously ill, ageing or just facing mounting opposition, we should somewhat counterintuitively expect the provincial leaders closest to him to be most busy preparing themselves for a post-incumbent scenario. When the ruler is weak, provincial leaders will have stronger incentives to accrue power to guarantee their security in a context of growing uncertainty. Furthermore, we should also expect power-accruement during such periods to be more likely to succeed, as the weakened dictator will be more eager to keep provincial leaders on his side and less capable of effectively monitoring and striking back at them.

Design

We use an in-depth, single-case study approach to analyse empirically the complex interrelated dynamics between personalist rulers and provincial leaders. The case study allows us to examine thoroughly how and why the independent power of a power-accruing provincial leader in a personalist authoritarian context changes over time. Thus, it serves both as a rich illustration and as an initial plausibility probe of the theoretical arguments presented above (Seawright and Gerring 2008).

More specifically, we conduct a study of a contemporary, very powerful provincial leader in a personalist authoritarian regime: Ramzan Kadyrov, leader of the Chechen Republic, which is a federal subject within President Vladimir Putin's Russia. Across the period from his rise to power in the early 2000s up until today, we analyse how and why Ramzan Kadyrov consolidates local power by using different strategies of boundary control, as well as how President Putin reacts to his moves. In doing so, we pay particular attention to how each of the proposed contextual factors affect Kadyrov's incentives and actions. The analysis is built on empirical data from a variety of sources, including academic publications, articles from newspapers, online news services, public surveys, statistics from the Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) and – not least – insights from numerous interviews with experts on Chechnya as well as well-informed Chechen emigrants living in capitals across Europe.

We choose the case of Russia as it is today not only a typical example of a personalist regime, but also a regime whose inner workings are becoming increasingly important for the West to understand (Baturo and Elkink 2016; Dawisha 2015). We focus on the Chechen Republic and the rule of Kadyrov as this represents a case in which the provincial leader, despite being embedded in an increasingly personalist regime context, has gained more and more power over the province he heads (Russell 2011). In fact, Kadyrov's Chechnya offers an almost ideal-type illustration of each of the contextual conditions that we highlight as important explanations for why provincial leaders attempt and succeed with a power-accruing strategy.

To illustrate further the special utility of this case as a first theoretical validity check and to show that our theoretical argument can transfer to other cases as well, we also present and discuss examples of six other power-accruing provincial leaders from both Russia and other personalist regimes in the post-Soviet space. This additional comparative outlook can be found in the Online Appendix. Here, we provide information on how the provincial leaders score on the theoretical conditions of interest (see Table 1 in the Online Appendix), and, subsequently briefly discuss how these conditions shaped the strategies and political destinies of these subordinates.

Empirical analysis

From its inception in the early 2000s, Russia's Putin regime has been characterized as personalist (Baturo and Elkink 2016). Leading positions in the state apparatus, state monopolies and key institutions have been granted to Putin's associates, friends and colleagues on the basis of their perceived loyalty to the Russian president. This approach has been applied in business and the economy as well. For

example, Putin's childhood friends, the Rotenberg brothers, who are in charge of Russia's largest construction company, and Yury Kovalchuk, Putin's personal banker, have made fortunes thanks to the president's backing. At the top level, power emanates from Putin's executive-branch staff, which is centred on the presidential administration, and the security and intelligence services, whose key positions are held by the president's closest associates as well.

With the strengthening of the 'power vertical' in Russia, since around 2003, the personalist regime in Russia has become even more potent and virtually omnipresent. This has also had a strong impact on the relations between the centre and the provincial level. With free and fair elections ultimately abandoned, provincial leaders – who in Russia are referred to as governors – have (at least since 2005) been de facto appointed by the Kremlin based on their personal relationship with Putin (Reuter and Robertson 2012). During the same period, the president has sought deliberately to undermine the political and economic independence of those appointed to the Russian regions, and the practice of shuffling governors has been widespread (Busygina et al. 2018: 66). In recent years, arbitrary and unexpected shuffles and even arrests of governors (as well as other high-level regional officials) have steadily increased (Reuter 2017; Zubarevich 2017). In 2018 alone, 20 out of Russia's 85 federal subjects saw new leaders being appointed.

Throughout Putin's time in power, the Kremlin has above all demanded loyalty, political stability and the delivery of required results in the federal elections. Nonetheless, the risk of becoming the target of shuffling, demotion or criminal charges is a constantly looming threat for all governors in Putin's Russia (Reisinger and Moraski 2017: 98). On these grounds, it seems fair to assume that the provincial leader's trade-off should dominate the strategic thinking of the Russian governors.

In what follows, we analyse how this trade-off has shaped the behaviour of Ramzan Kadyrov who, as one of the longest-serving Russian regional executives, has governed the poor, but oil-rich North Caucasian republic of Chechnya since 2004.[5] The analysis is divided into three phases. The first phase, 'consolidation', analyses the Kadyrov family's rise to power in Chechnya. It spans from Akhmat Kadyrov's appointment in 2000 as provisional head of Chechnya to Ramzan Kadyrov's de facto ascension to power following his father's assassination in 2004 and his formal appointment in 2007. The second phase, 'monopolization', evolves from around 2007 until Putin's formal return to the presidential office in 2012 amid the peak of anti-regime protests across Russia. The third phase, 'expansion beyond the provincial level', has been taking place since 2012. Across all three phases, we analyse how the three conditions highlighted in the theory section have shaped both Kadyrov's incentives to pursue a power-accruing strategy and Putin's reactions to his increasingly erratic behaviour. While the first two conditions dominate the first two phases, the importance of the third condition becomes clear only in the third phase.

Phase 1: Consolidation

In the autumn of 1999, the Russian army reinvaded Chechnya and terminated a three-year period of this North Caucasian republic's de facto independence. By

early 2000, after weeks of fierce fighting, the devastated city of Grozny had been retaken by the Russian army. Remaining insurgent units regrouped into Chechnya's villages and mountain areas. With the insurgency still raging on, the Kremlin tasked itself with the goal of arranging the political organization of a troublesome republic. For Putin, the short-term goal was counterinsurgency, and in the long run he aimed for the re-establishment of central control over the republic. This dual goal-setting shaped the external environment in which first Akhmat Kadyrov and soon after his son and successor, Ramzan Kadyrov, sought to manoeuvre. As we show below, during this first phase it was the special characteristics of Chechnya as an unstable and conflict-torn federal province that provided both Kadyrovs with unprecedented leeway to build up and consolidate a potent local power base.

Instability as facilitator for political power accumulation

Akhmat Kadyrov was appointed by the Kremlin as a provisional head of Chechnya's pro-Moscow government in 2000. His appointment was instrumental in helping to break the insurgency from within. As a reputed Sufi mufti and a former separatist leader, Kadyrov had indeed established contacts in the midst of insurgent groups. Eventually, some insurgent leaders chose to defect to the pro-Moscow camp along with their foot soldiers who formed the core of the *kadyrovtsy*, an ethnic-Chechen paramilitary unit consisting of thousands of former insurgent defectors established in the early 2000s (Šmíd and Mareš 2015).

To win the trust of the president, Akhmat Kadyrov did his utmost to solve the main task put before him: eradicating all opposition to Moscow's supremacy within the region. Following Akhmat's assassination in 2004, his son, Ramzan, continued this strategy. To do this effectively, Kadyrov fiercely advocated for the *kadyrovtsy* to replace the Russian army as the main fighting forces against the local insurgents. Capable of deploying selective violence, *kadyrovtsy* succeeded where the federal forces had utterly failed. In particular, under Ramzan Kadyrov's leadership, they achieved important counterinsurgency successes, mainly through brutalizing the local population to refrain from providing support to the insurgent groups (Russell 2014).

In spite of these initial successes, it is important to note that Moscow initially tried to keep the Kadyrovs on a tight leash. As Putin himself and the Russian security and intelligence services, the *siloviki*, as well as the internal ethnic Chechen anti-separatist opposition, harboured a certain amount of distrust towards the former insurgent veteran, a system of checks and balances was established to ensure that Akhmat Kadyrov made no mistakes that would threaten Moscow's plans in Chechnya (Souleimanov 2015). On the one hand, the establishment of the *kadyrovtsy*, put under the command of the Kadyrov family, was blessed by Moscow in order to 'Chechenize' the local counterinsurgency. On the other hand, competing paramilitary forces – which contained Akhmat Kadyrov's long-standing pro-Moscow rivals, commanded by Said-Emin Khasiyev, Ruslan Gantamirov, as well as the Yamadayev brothers – were kept active in Chechnya to hedge against Kadyrov's hypothetical incalculability. In addition, Kadyrov himself initially only represented a chain in the complex hierarchy of command established by Moscow because he was deprived of tangible economic resources and was politically subordinated to the Kremlin (Šmíd and Mareš 2015). Putin thus clearly signalled to Kadyrov that though he was given leeway

unprecedented by national standards, Moscow still had the upper hand and could, if need be, dispose of him and appoint another pro-Moscow loyalist.

Instability and tasks as facilitators for economic power accumulation

Following two devastating wars, Chechnya was a country in ruins. With nearly total unemployment and a population driven out of the war-torn republic in hundreds of thousands, reconstruction became another of the Kadyrov family's most important tasks. Again, both Akhmat and Ramzan Kadyrov embraced the opportunity to show their worth to the Russian president, who in these years was personalizing the Russian regime to a hitherto unseen degree. The Kadyrovs oversaw the complex task of rebuilding the country's infrastructure and housing sector, creating jobs and ensuring some kind of basic social security. In particular, under Ramzan Kadyrov, a number of ambitious reconstruction projects were realized, with Grozny becoming a city of fashionable clubs, a billion dollars' worth of skyscrapers, monumental mosques and paved sidewalks.

Billions of dollars were allocated from the federal budget to finance these projects. The Kadyrovs gained the opportunity to concentrate in their hands control over solid financial resources. For example, they informally supervised the inflow of federal money to Chechnya's budget, with subsidies making up no less than 80% of the republic's annual income (Fuller 2017; Yashin 2016). Additionally, ever since the early 2000s, the Kadyrovs had been engaged in embezzlement. Clearly, this was happening with Putin's knowledge; federal institutions, including the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation, and the national media routinely reported on large-scale corruption and embezzlement, with dozens of millions of federal roubles periodically 'lost' in Chechnya. In 2002, Vladimir Kravchenko, who was in charge of the Chechen Prosecutor's Office, reported on 'the losses arising from the misuse of funds and other financial wrongs' which surpassed 128 million roubles. He also reported on hundreds of thousands of tons of Chechen oil and oil products being stolen and taken out of the country annually. The report of the Accounts Chamber in 2003 held that 21 million roubles were stolen in Chechnya, and up to 366 million had been 'ineffectively used', a term resurfacing in federal reports of the early and mid-2000s. Still, funds allocated to Chechnya increased from 3.8 billion roubles in 2003 to 5.8 billion roubles in 2005 (Souleimanov 2005).

Putin was obviously willing to let this happen as long as progress was visible in regard to the primary goals set for the Kadyrovs: counterinsurgency and, relatedly, reconstruction. The troublesome history of the region and the magnitude and complexity of the tasks put before the Kadyrovs thus paved the way for them to build not only an independent repressive force but also an independent economic power base of a kind unseen elsewhere in Russia.

Phase 2: Monopolization

During the late 2000s, Ramzan Kadyrov refocused all his efforts on a full monopolization of political and economic control over Chechnya. Two factors seem to explain these moves. First, and most importantly, the second condition highlighted in the theory section stands out: the counterinsurgency tasks put before him locked Kadyrov into a certain path in which fear of retribution from affected groups both

within and outside Chechnya forced him to continue, and even speed up, local power accumulation in both political and economic terms. Second, during 2008 and 2009, the first two years of the rule of the 'puppet' president of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, a large number of governors (30 in total) were removed. In particular, the Kremlin targeted regional executives with strong connections to the region they governed and replaced them with loyal 'outsiders' (Zubarevich 2017). These circumstances seemingly further impelled Kadyrov quickly to bolster his standing against both the federal centre and local avengers.

Fear of retribution as an accelerator of political monopolization

As Akhmat Kadyrov's counterinsurgency and reconstruction measures proved successful tools in partially solidifying control over the republic, Putin decided to make him leader of the region in an appointment-by-election manner in 2003. However, only a year after, the seeming normalization of Chechnya received a serious blow when Akhmat Kadyrov was assassinated. In an attempt to uphold the delicate balance of power established within the republic, Putin transferred power, albeit only informally, to Kadyrov's youngest son, Ramzan Kadyrov.[6] In 2007 the latter was formally appointed leader of Chechnya.

From 2004, the young Kadyrov had immediately pursued counterinsurgency actions even more forceful and brutal than under his father's rule. This has proved to have serious consequences for Ramzan Kadyrov's behaviour up to today. Most importantly, his ruthlessness has earned him dedicated enemies both within and outside Chechnya (Nemtsova 2016). Alarmed by the rapid expansion of his power, leading insurgent defectors and old-guard pro-Moscow Chechens as well as Russia's powerful security and intelligence services have all grown increasingly antagonized by Kadyrov and his unprecedented private army (Knight 2017). In addition, the deployment of the *kadyrovtsy* against the insurgents and their families, including their extrajudicial executions and 'forced disappearances', dragged Kadyrov, his family and his henchmen into a vicious cycle of blood feud with thousands of Chechen families across the republic (Souleimanov 2015; Ware 2009).

Against this background, the physical survival of Kadyrov and his family became contingent on the support provided to him by Putin and *kadyrovtsy*. To protect himself against retribution from those he had challenged and impaired, Ramzan Kadyrov could no longer count solely on the goodwill of the president of Russia. Were he to fall out of the president's favour, he and his family would lose not only their wealth and their privileges but possibly also their lives. As we show below, this impelled Kadyrov further to speed up his power-accruing efforts, even though he was fully aware that such actions might worry Putin, the very man on whose continued support he was dependent.

Initially, Kadyrov targeted the few remaining powerful and life-threatening rivals to his rule. In 2007, the Kadyrov family's age-old rival, Said-Magomed Kakiyev, was prompted to leave his position as commander of a battalion, with his paramilitary units disbanded. Kadyrov's regime proxies also killed some of his key rivals and critics while forcing others out of the country and into silence or outright collaboration (Šmíd and Mareš 2015). Even the influential Yamadayev brothers with their own much-feared paramilitary units, the *yamadayevtsy*, which Moscow had preserved since the early 2000s as a counterbalance to *kadyrovtsy*, fell victim to

Kadyrov's efforts to monopolize power. Though low-intensity clashes had taken place periodically between the two competing groups throughout the 2000s, Kadyrov had not dared to strike at a group that enjoyed support from some of the most powerful people in the inner circle of the Kremlin (Gendron 2009). This changed when Kadyrov's men successively assassinated two of the Yamadayev brothers: Ruslan Yamadayev was killed in Moscow in broad daylight in 2008 and, the year after, Sulim Yamadayev, the leader of the clan, was assassinated in Dubai (Harding 2008).

Though this was a daring move, Putin apparently accepted it, with Russian intelligence services and diplomatic corps having probably provided support to the assassins.[7] Following this, the *yamadayevtsy* themselves were disbanded and incorporated into the *kadyrovtsy*, all with Moscow's explicit approval (Šmíd and Mareš 2015). Unwilling to jeopardize Chechnya's hard-won stability, Putin sided with Kadyrov and prevented the simmering conflict between the two competing power centres from escalating into a full-scale armed conflict by tolerating Kadyrov's annihilation of the competing clan. Most likely, the fact that the conflict peaked around the time when Putin handed the presidency, but not de facto power, to Medvedev might have made the choice easier for him. At a time when regime stability was of utmost importance, Kadyrov's power-accruement was seen as the lesser of two evils by the otherwise all-dominant Putin.

Fear of reshuffling as an accelerator of economic monopolization

Simultaneously, Kadyrov cemented his economic standing as he increasingly got hold of federal funds entering Chechnya as well as acquiring control over income generated within the republic itself. A focal point of Kadyrov's policy of economic centralization was to become more economically independent of Moscow in an attempt to make it more costly for the Kremlin to get rid of him should the tide turn.

As part of this strategy, the Akhmat-Haji Kadyrov Fund came to play a key role. Formally run by Kadyrov's mother, the fund has been replenished by direct contributions from Chechnya's state employees, who are required to hand over a certain share of their monthly salaries, in addition to money contributed by businessmen and Chechen oligarchs alike, including the Jabrailov brothers, Ruslan Baysarov and Mikail Gutseriyev (Dadayev 2006). Hence, a form of informal taxation has been established (*Kavkazskii uzel* 2015). All together, the share of 'voluntary donations' to the fund has reportedly been 3–4 billion roubles, equivalent to around 100 million dollars. This income is excluded from taxation and any form of external control as it works as Kadyrov's personal cash desk (Fuller 2015). The fund has been involved in business activities and in many of the large prestigious construction projects in Chechnya, including the MegaStroyComplect (renamed MegaStroyInvest in 2012), the Grozny Avia company and Leader Auto. In addition to the fund, Kadyrov also managed to secure subsidies for many of these projects from various federal agencies. In fact, in the period of 2007–2012 alone, MegaStroyInvest acquired nearly 3 billion roubles, all from state-commissioned projects (*goszakaz*), followed by other companies with incomes in the range of dozens of millions.

Hence, over these years, Kadyrov exploited the widened manoeuvrability allotted to him by the Kremlin and managed to acquire control over substantial sources of both Chechen and federal revenues. This massive economic monopolization

happened alongside, and further strengthened, the power-accruing strategy pursued by the Chechen provincial leader. The greater degree of economic independence made him less vulnerable to pressure from the centre and thus served as a vital element in his attempt to guard himself against the dual threat of being removed by the centre and punished by local vengeful elites, and of being targeted by the antagonized local population.

Phase 3: Expansion beyond the provincial level

Since around 2012, Kadyrov has gradually embraced a more diversified strategy for staying in power. Now he not only tries to shore up control within Chechnya through targeted repression. He has also tried to win additional boundary control vis-à-vis Moscow by making attempts to improve his image among the Chechen population and expanding his political clout in both the national and the international arena. Three factors seem to explain this change. First, during the years 2012–2013 and 2017–2018 another wave of dismissals of provincial leaders swept across Russia, yet again making it clear to the Chechen strongman that his political privileges and survival rested on shaky ground. Second, from around 2012, the third condition highlighted in the theory section has become increasingly important (Zubarevich 2017). When mass protests occurred in Moscow and Putin returned to the presidency after four years as prime minister, the members of the ruling coalition of the Russian regime began thinking about and preparing for a possible post-Putin scenario should the ageing president decide to leave politics. Ever since, the post-Putin scenario has only increased in political importance (Pirchner 2019). For Kadyrov, a leadership change in Moscow constitutes a major threat. When we combine these two factors of political insecurity with Kadyrov's seemingly growing concern with his personal security, evident in his fear of retributive acts from opponents both within and outside Chechnya, his quest for additional boundary control, which we observe during this third phase, appears completely rational.

Fear of retribution and post-Putin uncertainty as accelerators of political and coercive build-up

Though Kadyrov in the preceding years did his utmost to eradicate most of the powerful potential avengers within Chechnya, the looming threat of blood revenge has still played a dominant role in the strategic thinking of the Chechen strongman during this third phase. Thus, if there is a possible future confrontation with Moscow, Kadyrov also has to expect numerous challengers within Chechnya. Recent reports suggest that most of those on whom Kadyrov and his private army have inflicted injustice now nurture plans for retaliation (Kirilenko 2017; Sokirianskaya 2017). If the Kadyrov regime is weakened – for instance by falling into disfavour in Moscow in a post-Putin scenario – these individuals, likely numbering thousands, may use the opportunity to hit Kadyrov, his relatives or their own enemies in the ranks of *kadyrovtsy*.

To make the situation worse, Kadyrov has since the 2000s been going through a latent 'cold war' with Russia's feared security services. While open sources are understandably scarce on the matter, there is ample implicit evidence to suggest

that Kadyrov's brazen manner, unprecedented power and competences have been antagonizing the Russian ruling elite for a long time. As a former senior Kremlin official confessed, 'many in the security services hate Kadyrov' for that, and 'they may well try to rip up this model if they get the chance. When Putin leaves, that will be a dangerous moment' (Hille 2018). According to the veteran Kremlinologist Andrei Piontkovsky, 'only the personal union of Putin and Kadyrov keeps them [the *siloviki*] from unleashing the third Chechen war. And their long-standing goal is to break this union' (Knight 2017). Thus, the possible change of guard in the Kremlin has made this conflict come more clearly out in the open. If Russia's post-Putin elites or Kadyrov's personal enemies within Chechnya choose to encroach on his unprecedented privileges, a major political, economic and even military backlash may occur, with Kadyrov likely to rely on his private army. It has become increasingly obvious to many that the Chechen leader would choose a fight, no matter how desperate, rather than self-sacrifice (Hille 2018).

Kadyrov appears to be fully aware of this dual imminent threat. To hedge against the threatening post-Putin scenario, Kadyrov has engaged in ever-more-brutal acts of targeted repression and invested heavily in a massive build-up of his personal coercive forces. The former relatives of slain insurgents, particularly men who may seek revenge on the Kadyrovs or *kadyrovtsy*, have either been targeted extra-judicially or forced to leave Chechnya to reduce the likelihood of retaliation (Korotayev 2017). In 2017, an attempt to assassinate Kadyrov was made by the youngest of the Yamadayev brothers, which is indicative of the constant threat of blood revenge dangling over the Chechen strongman and his family. On several other occasions when the Kadyrov family members incidentally killed or fatally injured ordinary Chechens, the regime was quick to force the 'offended' families to abandon retaliation. For instance, in late 2018, a car accident caused by Kadyrov's cousin, the governor of the Shali district, left a family of three dead. Kadyrov's people soon paid a visit to the relatives of the killed family to make sure they reconciled with the Kadyrovs and did not declare blood revenge to the culprit's family. Furthermore, unable to withstand immense pressure from Kadyrov's security forces, the relatives of the killed family even publicly asked Kadyrov not to punish his cousin – an unprecedented move and a matter of enormous disgrace by Chechen customs (*Jam News* 2018).

In addition, Kadyrov has, since 2012, continued to invest heavily in *kadyrovtsy* to improve his standing both within Chechnya and vis-à-vis prospective challengers from the centre, should the situation on the ground necessitate it. Not only has the Chechen leader fought tooth and nail to retain control over his private army, he has also vigorously sought to further strengthen it. Formally, the forces have been subordinated to Russia's Ministry of Interior since the early 2000s, and Putin added them to the newly established National Guard in 2016. Yet, in practice, this paramilitary unit has remained Kadyrov's private army, which is an unprecedented situation in Russia given the nation's highly centralized security sectors (Halbach 2018: 10).

Even with opponents of the regime severely punished, Kadyrov has raised the number of the *kadyrovtsy* forces from 7,000 militants during the late 2000s, when the local insurgency was critically weakened, to 30,000 over the course of

the recent decade or so, in spite of the annihilation of Chechnya's insurgent groups. Funding and informal privileges have been boosted for *kadyrovtsy* to further cement their loyalty to Kadyrov, and they have continued to receive sophisticated weapons and technology (Temirkhanov 2018). There are thus reasons to believe that, should Kadyrov's relationship with Moscow deteriorate after Putin leaves office, Kadyrov might challenge the central authority, relying on the *kadyrovtsy* to survive politically and, given the prospectively deteriorating situation in Chechnya itself, to survive physically as well.

In case of a possible future confrontation with Moscow, Kadyrov has also found it important to improve his standing with the wider Chechen population. During this last phase, he has made deliberate attempts to represent himself as a devout Chechen nationalist (Weselowsky 2018). For example, Kadyrov's recent efforts to redraw the administrative borders with Ingushetia in order to acquire swaths of 'historical Chechen land' have been cheered by Chechen émigrés around the world, even by some of his personal enemies. This proves Kadyrov's ability to play the nationalist card effectively – a strategy that may prove particularly useful if the *siloviki* decide to challenge him in a post-Putin world (Bunce 2017).

Post-Putin uncertainty as an accelerator for power-accruement at the federal level

Kadyrov has now also entered the scene of federal and international politics, acquiring the role of the regime's committed defender from internal and external challengers. While Kadyrov has always sought to appeal to Putin as his key ally, his recent efforts have clearly gone beyond this. By styling himself as an indispensable actor of federal politics, the Chechen strongman seemingly seeks to gain additional boundary control. Again, it appears that the looming threat of the post-Putin scenario has prompted Kadyrov to build stronger connections with hard-line factions in Moscow in the hope that they too will consider him useful for their own purposes.

As for internal challenges, the series of 'colour revolutions' in the post-Soviet republics, coupled with the implications of the 'Arab Spring', have instilled fear in the Kremlin lobbies as to the regime's ability to defend itself during a tumultuous period of violent regime change (Gessen 2018). Mass anti-regime protests took place in Russia in the early 2010s; since then, protests have periodically recurred, most recently during the summer of 2019, only to be dispersed violently. Russia's socioeconomic situation has been deteriorating ever since as a result of falling oil prices, Western-imposed sanctions and the mismanagement of the Covid pandemic. To cope with the pressing problems, the regime has imposed higher taxation as well as increased the retirement age and payments for energy along with a series of other unpopular measures while preparing to tackle prospective turmoil. Among other things, a 400,000-strong National Guard, equipped with heavy weapons and allowed by law to use force, even against children and women, has been formed.

Kadyrov has taken advantage of the situation and presented himself as a committed defender of Russia's 'legitimate regime'. A vocal castigator of 'anti-systemic' Russian opposition, whom he has routinely labelled 'dogs', 'enemies of the people' and 'Western agents', Kadyrov has been implicated in the killing of Russian opposition leaders and key human rights activists, most recently of the leading opposition leader Boris Nemtsov. Declaring himself to be Putin's 'foot soldier', the Chechen

leader has made frequent threats to the opposition by raising speculation that his private army is kept as a reserve force ready to be deployed in case of mass protests. Indeed, Kadyrov and his close associates have sent numerous signals that, should they be given a chance, they are willing to deal with the opposition in their own way. For instance, during the 2015 protests in Russia, Kadyrov staged a massive pro-regime and anti-opposition demonstration in Grozny. His chief of staff, Magomad Daudov, posted a picture on Instagram of a huge Caucasian shepherd dog being held by the Chechen strongman. 'His teeth itch. He is barely restrained,', wrote Daudov (Oliphant 2016). Should public protests in Russia gain momentum, Kadyrov apparently hopes that the deployment of the *kadyrovtsy* may be considered a viable last resort for the regime. While the *kadyrovtsy* would effectively tackle protesters, the regime would distance itself formally from bloodshed by pointing to Kadyrov's long-nurtured image of a barely controllable 'savage highlander' (Kofman 2017: 14). Importantly, Kadyrov again emphasized his complete loyalty to Putin by falsifying the Chechnya vote in the 2020 referendum on constitutional amendments clearing the term limits of sitting or former presidents, and a number of other issues (*Moscow Times* 2020).

Turning to external challenges, Moscow's involvement in the 'hybrid war' in Ukraine's Donbas region since 2014 and its military engagement in the Syrian civil war since 2015 have allowed Kadyrov to prove his long-sought-for image as a committed Russian patriot willing to participate in the nation's military effort beyond just being Putin's key ally. Having backed the Kremlin's claim that civil unrest in Ukraine was instigated by the West, Kadyrov expressed willingness to deploy fellow Chechens in the Donbas war in order to protect ethnic Russians against the Ukrainian 'fascists and banderovites' (Malashenko 2015). Moreover, according to some sources, *kadyrovtsy* had already been deployed during Moscow's annexation of Crimea months prior to the Donbas war. Units of Russian military police in Syria have been almost entirely composed of experienced Chechen fighters, that is, present and former *kadyrovtsy* (Hodge 2017).

Thus, also in foreign policy, Kadyrov has gone the extra mile to position himself as a staunch supporter of the Russian regime, willing to take on even high-cost tasks. As a result of Kadyrov explicitly, and repeatedly, staging himself as the president's most devoted ally and guard during turbulent times for regime, Putin has tolerated, and seemingly even seen short-term benefits from, Kadyrov's entrance onto the national political scene.

Conclusion

In this article, we have introduced the 'provincial leader's trade-off', which emphasizes the difficult choices provincial leaders face when navigating in a threatening political environment such as that characteristic of a personalist dictatorship. Through an in-depth case study of Ramzan Kadyrov's Chechnya and comparative insights from six other examples of provincial leaders from within the post-Soviet region, we show how and why provincial leaders sometimes go against the tide and rise above the average subordinate in power and influence, occasionally even becoming so strong that they can directly challenge the incumbent dictator. The theory and the evidence we present makes a first important step towards a better

understanding of how centre–periphery relations affect governance capabilities, dictator–elite struggles and, ultimately, leader and regime stability in authoritarian contexts.

We invite scholars of comparative authoritarianism to explore this subject. One avenue for future research could be to investigate the scope conditions of our argument. The cases we analyse in this article and in the Online Appendix indicate that power-accruing provincial leaders may emerge in various types of personalist autocracies, but it could very well be that they are more frequent in larger, federal-like units such as Russia compared with smaller, more homogeneous countries such as Belarus. It could also be that some of the conditions that we have shown to be conducive for the emergence of powerful provincial leaders are more likely in particular contexts. Finally, it might be that the theorized dynamics are more pronounced in personalist settings but also apply – perhaps to a lesser degree – to other authoritarian regime types. The cases we analyse in the Online Appendix seem to indicate that power-accruing provincial leaders appear both in highly personalist and less personalist regimes. This issue should also be explored further.

Many a dictator started his political career as a provincial leader. It is about time that we learned why some make it to the pinnacle of power, while others are demoted, purged or just never manage to advance. To this end, systematically studying the 'provincial leader's trade-off' and the behaviour of subnational political leaders would appear to be a promising endeavour.

Supplementary material. To see the supplementary material for this article, please go to: https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.13

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Notes

1 Almost exclusively, dictators have been, and still are, men. This also applies to the vast majority of their provincial leaders. We thus follow the convention in autocracy research and refer to members of both groups as males (cf. Geddes et al. 2018: 8).

2 Some argue that political selection in China is based on the meritocratic deeds of candidates (Li and Zhou 2005), others that only the competent candidates from a pool of loyal candidates will be allowed to be promoted (Jia et al. 2015).

3 Though this is not constrained to only personalist autocracies, the phenomenon is far more widespread within this regime setting (Svolik 2012: 79–80).

4 Though it is constructed to account for the rise and fall of authoritarian regions within otherwise democratic regimes, most of the arguments are readily applicable to an authoritarian context; see, for example, Gelman (2010).

5 Among provincial leaders still in power in Russia, only Sergey Morozov, governor of the Ulyanovsk Oblast, has also served for this long. In contrast to Kadyrov, he seems to be almost the ideal type of a loyal, acquiescent provincial leader.

6 In the period 2004–2007, Alu Alkhanov, a police officer loyal to the Kadyrov family, served as the formal leader of Chechnya, while Ramzan Kadyrov ran the republic informally. Aged 27, Ramzan Kadyrov was not appointed formally in 2004 because the Chechen constitution required a republican president to be at least 30 years old.

7 Some of the suspects engaged in the assassination were Russian agents based in the UAE embassy. Isa Yamadayev, the youngest brother, was forced to declare publicly his willingness to reconcile with Kadyrov, a move apparently done under pressure from Moscow (Marten 2012: 115).

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